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**“WE MUST BE DOING SOMETHING RIGHT TO LAST TWO HUNDRED
YEARS”: NASHVILLE, OR AMERICA’S BICENTENNIAL AS VIEWED BY
ROBERT ALTMAN**

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Abstract: In this paper, I will discuss Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975) in the context of its relationship to bicentennial-era American socio-political culture, contemporary American filmmaking, and other films by Altman. In particular, I will argue that *Nashville* is typical in its problematic representation of “America,” echoing similarly problematic representations of contemporary America found in a number of films of the period. American society in 1975 anticipated the upcoming bicentennial and presidential election in 1976, but a sense of positive American renewal was complicated by very recent memories of the withdrawal from Vietnam (a matter of weeks before *Nashville*’s release), Watergate, and the pervasive ideological polarization of the late 1960s onward. *Nashville* is characterized by both the dystopic narrative structure and the fragmentary visual style common to Altman’s films and numerous “New Hollywood” films of the 1960s and 1970s, and which was symptomatic of a period which for many American filmmakers underlined the inapposite nature of utopian fantasies and the desirability of rejecting the traditionally more ordered, invisible and “objective” style of filmmaking that defined much of the American cinematic past. *Nashville*’s conscious representation of contemporary America – an America defined in terms of polarized communities, a bankrupt political culture, and the threat of random violence - ensures the film’s resonance as a cultural document, and as such one that merits considered analysis.

“Since the early 60s”, according to Robin Wood, “the central theme of the American cinema has been, increasingly, disintegration and breakdown” (2003:24). This sense of disordered fragmentation – producing narratives increasingly emphasising the personal failures of their characters, and a new and vital visual style emphasising a need to look at the represented world anew – has justifiably been analysed in terms of

its contextual relationship with the ideological fragmentation besetting American culture and society in the 1960s and 1970s. As a consequence of the Vietnam War, assassinations of idealistic political figures, urban riots, and open ideological polarisation, the United States became a country characterised by ideological fragmentation, the political climate of consensus of the past being replaced by an atmosphere in which the tenets of the dominant ideology were openly scrutinised by a substantial section of the American population. As the editor-in-chief of *Time* magazine stated in the late 1960s, there seemed to be a “loss, for the first time in our lives, as to what we think America means” (Hedley Donovan quoted in Hodgson 1976: 364). Set against this social, cultural, and ideological background, the American film industry revealed itself as an art form particularly responsive to cultural trends; such was the magnitude and societal impact of the period’s ideological fragmentation, the film industry could arguably do little else. As a consequence, films began to express the sense of uncertainty which characterised the period, problematising the representation of America in the present and in the past (in the case of the Western, which, in films such as *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah 1969) and *Soldier Blue* (Nelson 1970), sought disturbing contemporary parallels in the shape of echoing the conflict in Vietnam).

Narratives presented scenarios in which the most visible and resonant signifier of uncertainty was evidenced in the representation of the protagonist, the era witnessing what Peter Lloyd has termed “the gradual collapse of the efficacy of the heroic individual” (quoted in Kramer 1998: 299). It is not uncommon in films of the period for heroic failure to be marked by death, but where death does not necessarily take place, an overriding sense of impotence characterises the central protagonist, whose presence is rendered ultimately ineffective in the face of the larger, often disturbingly anonymous forces weighing against him. The consistently impotent representations of heroism in 1970s film mirrored the wider social, cultural, political and ideological make-up of 1970s America, cinematic representations of impotence resonating with audiences who experienced life in an America where idealistic public figures were literally shot down, first-world soldiers were losing a war against third-world opponents, and the federal government was seen to be corrupt. In short, what Americans experienced was the death of a certain vision of America that they had once believed in; consequently, cultural representations of heroism in an American

setting often reflected the sense of failed idealism that reverberated in the wider culture. If earlier heroes “got the girl” and defeated a specific source of villainy, in films characterised by “a kind of a-priori optimism located in the very structure of the narrative about the usefulness of positive action” (Elsaesser 1975: 14), later heroes were frequently isolated in their lack of a female companion, and often ended the film in a defeated state themselves, in realisation of the futility of their actions, if not dead. Filmic representations of problematised heroism – or of protagonists “lost in a world that they no longer understand and are therefore powerless to master” (Cook 2000: 191) - took many forms, and were evidenced in a variety of genres, ranging from the Western, the police/private eye film, the musical, the horror film, and, to some extent, the disaster film.¹

Films of the period cemented a sense of uncertainty to the extent that spectators would be led to question their own value system. In seeing protagonists fail in their narrative quests, and/or evidence a strong degree of moral ambiguity, spectators were led to doubt the capacity for heroism in contemporary America. In Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Marlowe ineptly works his way through a world he himself finds incomprehensible (contemporary Los Angeles), and ends up shooting his best friend after realising the extent of his self-deceit, and his friend’s involvement in that deceit. Marlowe is far removed from the more assertive characterizations befitting his *noir* predecessors, and the narrative refuses the consolation of knowledge by deliberately convoluting its plot trajectory; as Wood argues, “it is not simply that the protagonist’s assumptions and decisions are called into question – the spectator too is prevented from forming secure judgements” (2003: 32). Marlowe’s cold-bloodedly flippant execution of his former friend, followed by his jaunty dance up the street as the credits roll, is replete with moral ambiguity. Whether it is Marlowe’s ineptitude and callousness, *Dirty Harry*’s (Siegel 1971) final discarding of his detective badge into a reservoir, or *Electra Glide in Blue*’s (Guercio 1973) friendly motorcycle cop being gunned down by drug-dealing hippies in the all-American setting of Monument Valley (an ironic response to *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969)), such films form a resonant statement of dystopian finality. Contemporary America is represented as a dark, fundamentally uncertain place, characterised by disturbed moral polarities and the ever-present threat of random and fatal violence.

As the lost protagonists of 1970s films represented a departure from the more confidently-realised screen characters of the past, the stylistic approach employed by “New Hollywood” directors similarly represented a departure from the filmmaking traditions of the “classical” period. Altman, alongside contemporaries such as Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah, effectively refuted “the classical American approach to film, which is to make the formal structure of a work erase itself as it creates its content” (Kolker 2000: 9). In establishing a stylistic approach which made liberal use of hand-held camera movements, zooms, slow-motion, jump-cuts and freeze-frames, such filmmakers made films which emphasised their own constructed status. The overall ideological resonance of this development has been aptly described by Robin Wood:

...the stylistic changes in the American cinema imply a tacit recognition that the “objective reality” of the technically invisible Hollywood cinema was always a pretense, a carefully fostered illusion – an admission that all artistic reality is subjective... Yet if all reality is subjective, all certitude is impossible (2003: 30).

If earlier filmmakers desired to create a world view based on a sense of consensual values and the reconciliation of potential conflicts, later filmmakers would seek to eschew such ideological evasion, creating world views that emphasised a lack of consensus and the ready presence of unsolvable conflicts, primarily because that was the world they saw around them, that they lived in, and that they sought, to varying degrees of emphasis, to represent. As Wood argues, the starkly obvious authorial imprint of such films represents something of an authorial statement, articulating the view: “This is the way I see the world” (ibid.). As such, the lack of certitude suggested by the emphasis placed by the director’s filmic style on the subjective nature of reality echoes the lack of certitude expressed in the narratives of such films, as described above; both the visual style and narrative systems of “New Hollywood” films echo the lack of certitude defining the period in which the films were produced and received.

It is against this cinematic and cultural background that a critique of *Nashville* should be contextualised. Released in the summer of 1975 in anticipation of the marking of America’s bicentennial in 1976, the film was conceived as something of a

commentary on the nation, its cultural life, and the ideological factors determining the signification of both. Interviewed by Bruce Williamson in 1976, Altman stated that his films underlined the idea that “we’re at this point and it’s sad” (2000: 40). Reflecting the dystopian reality of America in the era of Vietnam and Watergate, films like *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye*, *California Split* (1974), and *Nashville* attest to a sense of the world as populated by “marginal men and women caught in irresistible systems that shape desire and action” (Self 2002: vii). As such, the narratives present “psychologically confused, conflicted, alienated characters, enmeshed in frequently aimless plots constructed not on action but on inaction and reflection” (ibid.). Altman’s films leave scant room for heroism. Indeed, they deny the fictional validity of heroism by precisely exposing it as a fiction, and denying many of the situational requirements by which heroism can be expressed. Altman’s desire to create commentaries on contemporary American life led him away from representations of heroes, and towards more ostensibly realistic, and at least, for contemporary audiences, *recognisable* representations of human beings living in the same recognisably uncertain social world as themselves.

Nashville is nothing less than a film “about” America at the specific historical juncture of the mid-1970s. The film’s use of a multi-layered dialogue soundtrack and lack of a non-diegetic score, its use of “real” extras both in the form of the audiences attending the musical performances and in the form of actors Julie Christie and Elliot Gould playing themselves, and its use of authentic locations (such as the Ryman Auditorium - home to *Grand Ole Opry* broadcasts until 1974 - and the replica Parthenon based in Centennial Park), all serve to lend the film a semblance of authenticity in its microcosmic representation of contemporary America. Reflecting the polarised reality of contemporary American politics, the film’s narrative focuses on the experiences of performers close to the country-and-western music scene. As a musical genre identified in the popular imagination with the conservative wing of American politics, Altman’s use of this generic form as the platform for the narrative offers up an opportunity to address contemporary American society from the perspective of a dominant cultural tradition, whose specific American heritage lends resonance to the idea of *Nashville* being, as Wood describes it, “an image of America” (2003: 25). That the film begins with its opening credits in red, white, and blue, and

ends with a very public assassination, suggests as much, and it is the specific nature of that image of America offered by Altman in this film that merits analysis.

From the film's beginning, Altman demands the astute spectator read *Nashville* against the context of the upcoming bicentennial celebration and presidential election of 1976. The film had its national release in the summer of 1975, thereby addressing an audience mindful of those upcoming and considerably significant events. While both the bicentennial and the upcoming election at one level served to imbue the "average" American's imagination with a sense of national pride and faith in the country's democratic traditions, that same "average" imagination could not ignore the reverse image of America determined by very recent memories of the fall of Saigon (at the end of April 1975) and the Watergate scandal, together both emphatic master narratives of American loss, failure, and corruption. As much as the election and the bicentennial anticipated a sense of American renewal, the shadow of Watergate and Vietnam loomed large over these events. The historical climate in which *Nashville* was released fashioned a double-sided image of America, evidencing the still-present state of ideological fragmentation besetting American culture. Any film representing America in this context could not easily avoid echoing this fragmentation, and Altman, as an identifiably liberal filmmaker, was better placed than other filmmakers to represent America in this problematic light; if even wholly mainstream films like *The Towering Inferno* (Guillermin 1974) could allude to problematic strains in the idealised image of America (by showing corporate greed to be the cause of the disaster), then an Altman film seeking to represent America in a more directly critical sense could not shy away from a recognition of the problematic status of that image.

Nashville's first images are of a van decorated with political slogans for the "Replacement Party" being driven out of an anonymous garage and subsequently into morning traffic, espousing via a Tannoy the mantra – "We're all involved in politics" – which nobody seems to take any notice of. This understated opening, and the subsequent appearance of the van espousing similar messages in the background to myriad scenes of Nashville life (and similarly ignored), are typical of Altman's filming style, seemingly casual and arbitrary, yet, as Robert Kolker observes, "calculated to situate the viewer in the narrative in specific ways" (2000: 333). The fact that the van belongs to a minority third party in the American political scene

understates its presence to begin with, and the van's broadcast rhetoric is populist and superficial, dictated by the somewhat bland voice of the candidate, one Hal Philip Walker, who is never actually seen in the film. His anonymity lends his portrayal a disturbing quality (a point which I will return to in discussion below), as does his third party status, *Nashville* being released just seven years after George Wallace's American Independent Party received over 13% of the vote in 1968 (Graubard 2004: 482). Subsequent to its first appearance in the film, the van is seen driving in the background of various exterior scenes, quite superfluous to events in the foreground. The apparent indifferent reaction to the van's presence on the part of those it travels past registers a sense of the widespread apathy felt in the United States towards the political process, an apathy ultimately expressed in the historically low voter turnout of 54% in the 1976 presidential election (Pomper 1977: 72). Walker's commentary refers to voter apathy, and for all the film's suggestions of an apathetic reaction to this message, "We're all involved in politics" is ultimately revealed to be a prophetic statement, inasmuch as the film ends with a rally organised by the Walker campaign, which is witness to a very public assassination. The fractured but consistent appearances of the van suggests the constant presence of politics in the backgrounds of our lives, ironically stated by Walker's voice at the start of the film, "whether we like it or not, or know it or not." By the end of the film, we certainly know it.

Appropriately for a largely conservative musical genre, the first song heard in *Nashville*, faded in as the van passes into the distance, is a blatantly celebratory anthem for bicentennial America, which expresses the view: "We must be doing something right to last two hundred years." The song praises both militarism and God (the former being hardly a case of "doing something right" in the wake of the loss of the Vietnam War), and it comes as little surprise that when an out-of-place "hippie" piano player elects to retire from the recording session, the singer, established star Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) offers the parting shot: "Get your hair cut. You don't belong in Nashville." At this point, the film sharply cuts to a close-up of the airport signage for Nashville, the airport being at the centre of media attention for the imminent arrival of fellow established star Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley). The abrasive editing echoes the point that Nashville forms something of a cultural barrier, the sudden appearance of the airport sign being not unlike the sharp cuts employed in numerous films to preventative or warning signs signalling a sense of danger.

Nashville, as central to an American dominant cultural tradition, seeks to exclude those at, presumably, the other end of the political spectrum. What is observed at the airport confirms the idea that Nashville sits comfortably with the traditional values of America, and the ideological system upheld by those values. As Barbara Jean arrives to address the press on the tarmac, a cheer-girl troupe undertakes a dance routine featuring fake rifles as a prop, and the “sweet” faces of the girls echo with the smiling face of Barbara Jean, all to the accompaniment of a high school band’s rendition of the national anthem. The singer and the dancing girls, both “innocent” as defined by their appearance, are implicated in being part of the same ideological tradition, one which is intensely patriotic, and associates the values of the military with that sense of patriotism. In beginning the film in this way, Altman firmly establishes what Nashville signifies – a centre of all-American values, but even in this capacity cracks appear in the seam. In the terminal building, arriving singer Tom (Keith Carradine) asks a soldier whether he’s “killed anybody this week,” and as an ever-present reminder of the politicised nature of everything, the Hal Philip Walker campaign van drives past the terminal building, and a rented campaign crowd is seen inside the building with their placards.

As “America” in 1975 signified both the upcoming bicentennial and the messy (and horrendously wasteful) failure in the Vietnam War, Nashville, as a representative microcosm of America, is portrayed in Altman’s film as a dystopian space embodying the worst of America, populated by an assortment of characters who collectively encapsulate a sense of endemic negativity. The musicians are variously characterised by pomposity, venality, callousness, and mental instability, while those accompanying them in the shape of fans, managers, and political agents are respectively characterised as hopelessly optimistic dreamers (inasmuch as they expect their unexceptional singing “talent” to be recognized), bullish but ultimately weak, and cynically exploitative. In addition, one character who duly assumes significance is ultimately revealed to be criminally psychotic. Taken in their totality, scenes evidencing numerous outbursts of vindictive bickering amongst musicians, the drunken abuse directed by a black character towards a “white-acting” black singer, the boos of an audience towards Barbara Jean as she suffers a mental breakdown, and the unthinkingly mocking and exploitative response of a group of men towards a desperately nervous stripper, are representative of a social world where, as in many

Altman films, “isolation and self-absorption” define the characters therein (Kolker 2000: 353). As such, Nashville’s alienated community becomes a metaphor for the wider national population, alienated and dislocated, split apart by ideological fragmentation and fundamentally disenchanted with America. In this all-American place, all-American phenomena are evidenced in the shape of country-and-western music, excessive commercialisation, the corrupting influence of politics, and, ultimately, political assassination.

While the near-constant presence of Walker’s agent, Triplette (Michael Murphy), in the background of many of *Nashville*’s scenes underlines the political need to buy celebrity endorsements, Altman cynically observes the vapidly superficial commercial environment in which the Nashville festival operates. It is significant that Triplette is seen to be present on the stage at the *Grande Ole Opry* performance, the sponsorship of which by the confectionary brand Goo-Goo being emphasised by Altman’s direction. What appears in the film is a sort of surrogate *Grande Ole Opry*, in the sense that Altman uses the actual auditorium (the Ryman Auditorium), the actual audience, the actual sponsor, and the actual musicians of the real *Grande Ole Opry*, but not the actual singers, who are instead portrayed by the ensemble cast of the film (in addition, four characters sit among the actual audience). In mixing the fictional world of the film with the real, authentic world of Nashville, specifically in utilising an authentic *mise en scène*, Altman undermines the authentic world by both associating it with negative fictional elements (the presence of Triplette), and emphasising the negative elements of the authentic world. The latter emphasis is largely created by the observation of the required practices of the Goo-Goo sponsorship, involving two announcers singing a somewhat pathetic jingle in a mock country-and-western style, to undoubtedly coerced audience applause, as the camera zooms into the large Goo-Goo poster above the stage. Interestingly, the zoom is qualitatively haphazard, appearing to be the result of a hand-held camera, and uneven due not only to a perceptible wobble but also a mid-zoom break in the flow of the zoom, defying the expectation of a continuous flow. This camera movement might have been dictated by problematic physical conditions of filming, but the effect it creates is one of dislocation, as if the Goo-Goo poster only merits casual, haphazard filming. Certainly, even if the manufacturers of Goo-Goo were happy to have Altman filming their sponsorship practices in thinking of it as free advertising, the actual

effect of the portrayal of those practices is one that renders them in a parodic and ultimately critical light. In emphasising the presence of the sponsoring manufacturer and the simultaneous presence of Triplette, the political “fixer,” Altman makes the point that both are in a sense linked, by their ability to buy the musicians they view as valuable commodities.

The final act of the *Grande Ole Opry* performance is that of Connie White (Karen Black), who tries to charm her audience by telling a group of boys loitering for autographs at the front of the stage that “Anyone of you could become President.” This idealistic utterance, registering pride in American democracy and by extension America itself, embarrassingly results in solitary applause, pathetically registering the widespread cynicism of the American population with regard to their political system in the mid-1970s. That this cynical response emerges from a country-and-western audience, a group not typically known for their counter-cultural sympathies, adds more weight to the impression of how widespread the cynicism is felt among the population, as does the authentic nature of the assembled audience. It is this atmosphere of cynicism which the Walker campaign naturally wishes to connect with, as it represents a third party alternative, so at this point of the film one recognizes that while the campaign van drives unnoticed past numerous groups of people, it does convey a message which has a potential audience, even if hardly any actual policies are articulated (a typical Altmanesque irony, and not inaccurate in its observation of the image-led politics that dominates the political discourse in many democracies).

As the climactic sequence – an open-air concert publicising the Walker campaign – begins, a newscaster is heard stating that Walker has already won three primaries, proving him as a genuine political contender, and yet Altman ensures that Walker remains an enigma to the end. In a long shot, Walker’s motorcade is seen arriving, and as Walker and his entourage leave their vehicles, Altman’s camera zooms towards their indistinguishable figures, only for the view to be ironically blocked by a large pillar in the foreground, allowing Walker to retain his status of anonymity (a status additionally suggested by an absence of defined policies). When the shooting starts in due course, Walker’s motorcade makes for a hasty exit, and again his presence is rendered invisible. The fact that Walker remains unseen, despite being in many ways a pivotal figure in the narrative, is significant in the context of a device

utilised in many films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whereby the central source of villainy, whether that of an individual or of a larger collective, was rendered invisible, arguably registering the latent paranoia of American society at the time. As Robert B. Ray suggests, citing a number of films from the period, the depiction of villainy as depersonalised and anonymous tapped into the paranoia of the era, representing “societal problems as complex, impersonal, and pervasive”

(1985: 302).² Walker cuts a figure of great power in the narrative, but his anonymity associates him by implication with the perceived invisibility of other power structures relevant to conceptions of 1970s America, such as the military-industrial complex (which had a place in conspiratorial visions regarding the incessant pursuit of the Vietnam War). As such, despite Walker’s espousal of a renewal of democratic power, one is left with the feeling that he merely represents a new addition, in a different form, to the same type of insidiously anonymous power structure as existed before him.

As the stage performance begins, the introductory image accompanying the beginning of the music is the above-mentioned giant American flag, which fills the frame as it effectively dominates the performance space of the concert. The ideological resonance of an image of this type, also utilised to considerable effect at the beginning of *Patton* (Schaffner 1969), has particular resonance (and relevance) when employed in certain contexts. In the case of *Nashville*, the upcoming bicentennial forms a macrocosmic context, specific to America in the mid-1970s, representing an idealistic celebration of America and its history, yet the film leads the spectator to regard the idealistic nature of the bicentennial with a degree of cynicism. By this point of the film, an image dominated by the American flag resonates not at the utopian level, but at the dystopian level. As the breeze forces a ripple to flow through the flag, the effect is not only subtly beautiful, but subtly foreboding in its impact, suggestive of a fracture in the otherwise pristine appearance of the flag, which resonates as a symbolic representation of America. What transpires on the stage more directly represents a fractured impression of America - in the same vein as the very public assassinations of the Kennedy brothers in 1963 and 1968. As Barbara Jean sings, a relatively anonymous character, a fan by the name of Kenny (David Hayward), is seen moving among the crowd and getting closer to the stage. As Barbara Jean finishes her performance, Kenny shoots her a number of times before he is subdued,

and she lies mortally wounded on the stage. Seeking to calm the crowd, Haven Hamilton grabs the microphone and addresses the crowd with the agonising words, “They can’t do this to us here. This isn’t Dallas. This is Nashville!” In so doing, he underlines the ideological resonance of the perception of space, from the perspective of 1970s America. Hamilton’s statement alludes to a dreamy perception of Nashville as protected from the more turbulent events defining then very recent American history, but in the context of the film’s focus on the upcoming bicentennial and earlier dialogue references to America’s gun culture, the film suggests that such recent turbulence is as much historically relevant to the bicentennial as other histories, and that nowhere in America is insulated from the problematic effects of its gun culture. More disturbingly, there seems to be no reason as to why Barbara Jean should be the target of an assassin’s bullet. As Altman himself has observed, “everyone assumed it would be the political candidate who is assassinated, because that’s something we can accept, we buy that. But he shot the entertainer, and we don’t know why” (quoted in Thompson 2006: 94).

This lack of certainty ensures that the film ends on a note of dystopian ambiguity, with the on-screen characters looking as lost in their shock as the average spectator might well look. Like many other characters of 1970s films, *Nashville*’s characters are finally observed “lost in a world that they no longer understand and are therefore powerless to master” (Cook 2000: 191). One of the narrative’s more marginal characters, Albuquerque (Barbara Harris), ventures onto the stage to sing a song - “It Don’t Worry Me” - which assumes the quality of an ironic anthem as the crowd begin to join in. Its lyrics reflect a relaxed and carefree attitude to life’s trials, but its political basis is one of passivity, “It Don’t Worry Me” being synonymous with “It Don’t Bother Me”. At this climactic point of the film, there is something of an anti-climactic mood, precisely because the climactic event does not seem to affect a narrative resolution. As the ending of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* suggested that McCabe died “for absolutely nothing” (Kolker 2000: 352)³, so the ending of *Nashville* likewise positions the death of Barbara Jean. In denying the normative practice of associating a climactic death with a sense of narrative closure, Altman denies the climax a coherent basis for a conclusion, and the final shot of the film reflects this lack of closure. Tilting the camera up to look towards the sky, before zooming hesitantly into the sky, Altman seems to be suggesting that the camera has nowhere

else to go, reflecting the final uncertain direction of the narrative. If Altman's use of the zoom lens is typically representative of "a narrative probe" (ibid: 343), alternately exploring the meaning of a particularly resonant image or casually observing an interesting image (as in the contrasting zooms highlighting Wade's drowning and the copulating dogs in *The Long Goodbye*), in this final shot of *Nashville*, the camera seems to be desperately searching for meaning, and finds it absent. To look up to the sky, in this context, seems to represent a combined gesture of frustration and resignation, and after examining the clouds for a few seconds, all that is left for the film is a fade-out to black, offering a final expression of emptiness. As Altman once observed, "I've been criticised for not knowing how to do an ending – and I don't. The only ending I know is death" (quoted in Walker 2000: 127).

The ending of *Nashville* attests to the centrality of violence in contemporary America, and its unpredictable nature; more than this, however, the ending attests to contemporary America itself, the final sight of the sky expressing, in its drift from the scene of action, a temporally resonant sense of futility and uncertainty. The ending is also intensely reflective, confirming Robert T. Self's observation that Altman's films often focus "not on action but on inaction and reflection" (2002: 55). The haunting images of the sky in *Nashville*, of Marlowe jauntily dancing down a Mexican street at the end of *The Long Goodbye*, and of McCabe's body in the snowdrift and Mrs. Miller's opium-induced peacefulness at the end of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, all serve to encourage the spectator to reflect on what they see, and in so doing recognise the irony in what they see, the central irony, at least in the two latter films, arguably being the irreverent and casual display of life amid the cruel reality of death. That the assassination ending *Nashville* is followed by collective singing could be said to echo this analysis, but the effect of reflection is much more sombre in tone than the other films mentioned, where the reflection is alternately tinged with an ambiguous sense of exhilaration and an ethereal sense of nostalgia. In *Nashville*, the sudden and shocking nature of the violence is reflected upon not with exhilarated irony or nostalgic irony, but with confused and deflated irony, the sky offering no answers to a narrative enigma that has no answers. The lack of a full sense of closure is reflected in this final image, which in its spaciousness ironically echoes the earlier shot of the American flag, both images forming a singular and complete domination of the frame. If a relationship could be said to exist between these two images, it is as if the vacant sky

mirrors the flag, precisely in its sad vacancy, its emptiness. If the upcoming bicentennial anticipated a sense of American renewal, *Nashville*'s climactic assassination is a cruel reminder of America's recent past, a bitter riposte to a bicentennial-era desire to celebrate contemporary America, instead suggesting that there is little worth celebrating in an America defined, at the level of representation, by anonymous politicians, crass commercialism, soured personal relationships, and random acts of unmotivated and inconsequential violence. One may not "know why," in Altman's words (Thompson 2006: 94), any more than "why" the recent American past was marked by a series of assassinations, but one is left knowing that the assassination is symptomatic of an America that has lost its way. When Haven Hamilton defiantly states "This is Nashville!", rather than Dallas, an unfortunate and traumatic reality is laid bare. This is indeed Nashville, but it is very much also the United States of America.

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NOTES

1 Notable filmic examples of the above include *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971), *The French Connection* (Friedkin 1971), *The Long Goodbye* (Altman 1973), *Electra Glide in Blue* (Guercio 1973), *The Conversation* (Coppola 1974), *Night Moves* (Penn 1975), *The Parallax View* (Pakula 1974), *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid* (Hill 1969), *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah 1969), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Altman 1971), *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* (Peckinpah 1973), *Cabaret* (Fosse 1972), *Nashville* (Altman 1975), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973), *The Omen* (Donner 1976), and *The Towering Inferno* (Guillermin 1974).

2 Ray cites such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967), *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* as central to his analysis.

3 McCabe's death is ignored by the wider community, who attend a burning church (which seemingly meant little to them before), while he dies alone in the snow, leaving the expectation that the corporate forces he attempted to challenge will ultimately triumph over the apathy of the townspeople.

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